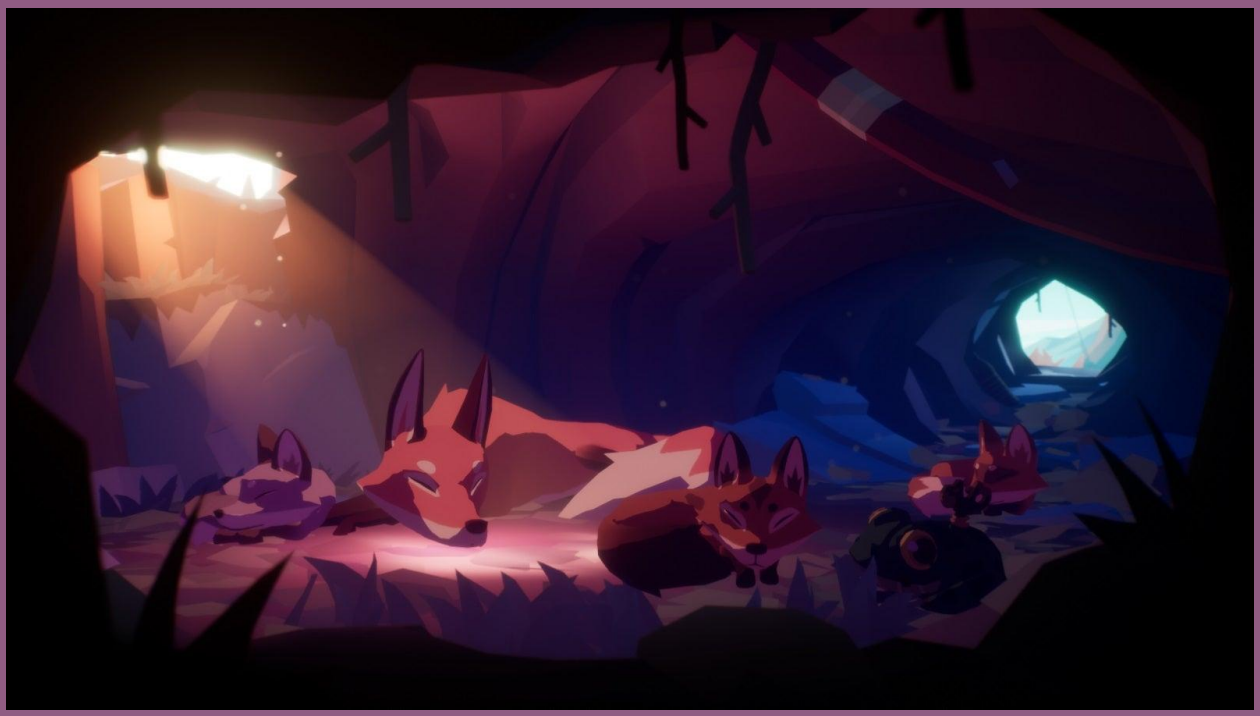
What makes a good game?

It isn't cutting edge graphics, a killer soundtrack, or good combat systems (although hey, those don't hurt.) It's the emotional experience the player is having. That might be having a blast wakeboarding in *Wii Sports Resort*, the rush of satisfaction from solving a puzzle in *Ghost Trick*, or the emotional gut punch of *The Last of Us*. It can even be something subtler. What sticks with us, long after a game, is the way it made us feel.

And what goes into that? Everything. It's the lighting in cutscenes and the style of the menus. It's the sound effects and art direction that bring the world to life. It's the rules that guide play and the feel of the controls. In great games, every aspect of design reinforces the intended emotional experience. Often, that means serving a narrative, but it doesn't have to. The *Microsoft Flight Simulator* games capture what it's like to take off at a busy airport in the city, duck into a valley through sunlit fog, and hurtle toward the edges of the sky with reckless abandon, with all the stalls and shudders along the way. Even in games without a narrative, good design means thinking through every aspect, asking, "How will players feel?”

Let's break “everything” down a little. Game design can broadly be divided into two categories: theming and play. Play is what you do in a game. It's also the rules and systems that govern how you play. Theming is everything that sells you on a game's world, story, and characters. The art, animation, voice acting, sound effects, music, and graphic design. A game can nail some of these aspects but leave others wanting, but when they all work together, they sing.

When looking at game design, we have to see the parts of the whole, how they do or don't work together to deliver the full experience. We have to break games down into their core components, take them apart to learn what makes them tick. We have to ask, “Why?”



Rules and Systems

Rules and systems shape the feel of a game, since they control what a player can do. They form the boundaries of play. Sometimes that means crafting an extensive playspace; other times, a more limited menu. Neither style is good or bad; what matters is how you use it. A sprawling map with loads to do is only as fun as the characters who inhabit it and the activities they can get up to. On the other end of the spectrum, a limited interface can ramp up the tension because you don't have all the information or options you'd like.

So, in *Bury Me My Love*, you never know if a smuggler is being sincere or trying to swindle your wife out of her money, because you can only communicate with her by text message. It creates a deep sense of anxiety in a game about a refugee's journey.

and Roger shows how mechanics can help tell a story and highlights the unique strengths of the medium. The protagonist is a woman with dementia, with a husband just trying to keep her comfortable. But to her,

he's a stranger who insists that he lives in her house. Furthermore, everything is hard for her. Daily tasks are puzzle and rhythm games, challenges with no instructions. Just washing her hands involves mastering a set of confusing button prompts. It's the kind of story no other medium can tell.

Systems can express ideas in unique ways, forcing us to look at them with fresh eyes. In *Station to Station: Perfect Tides*, reading books, meeting people, and having life experiences literally expands protagonist Mara's world, allowing her to call more people, write about more topics, and write about them more eloquently. It's a beautiful expression of a powerful idea: nothing you do is ever wasted.

It stands in contrast to *Afterlove EP*, where you decide how to spend your limited time: going to therapy, hanging with friends, busking for money, or starting a relationship with someone new. It’s a brilliant way to show opportunity cost, that every moment spent doing something is a moment you didn’t spend doing something else. It reminds us that our time is precious without offering easy answers as to how to juggle it.

Regina... it's nice to see you. Long time.

PERFECT!!
Dan aku mencari
And i've been searching for

Mechanics can be small things that make the world come alive. In *Dordogne*, a game about a young girl's vacation in the French countryside, you don't interact with the world in the usual ways. Instead, “I insert and rotate keys to open doors, tilt a box to pour cereal into a bowl (and all over the kitchen table), and hover my marionette-like hands over silverware to collect them from a riverbed. One of the most creative sequences involved slingshotting word bubble greetings over a cliff to convey shouting at a distant friend,” according to Marcus Stewart for Game Informer. The game is filled with opportunities for expression: taking photos, recording sounds with a tape recorder, and collecting stickers and cassette tapes. Combined with the dreamy watercolor art style, it captures its setting, and the feeling of summer vacation, well.

Mechanics can also show character. In *The Last Guardian*, you play as a boy exploring a valley with a giant, mythical beast. Each character has its own strengths and weaknesses: the boy is vulnerable in combat, but good at climbing and platforming, so he can break these stained glass windows the creature is scared of. He also pets the creature, named Trico, to soothe it after combat. He finds food for it and plucks arrows from its back. In return, Trico helps the boy in combat and across large gaps.

These mechanics show the bond between the two of them, the trust they have in each other. Trico is still a wild animal; it often ignores your commands or wanders off to explore. But you earn its respect through your actions, and it rewards you in kind. All of this tells a story without a single line of dialogue.

But the game really speaks when it breaks its own rules. Early on, the game establishes that Trico will not go near stained glass windows. You, the boy, must figure out how to break them so Trico feels safe. But at one point, you're caught in a citadel, surrounded by guards who intend to kill you. You think, "That's it. It's over," before Trico leaps through a giant, stained glass window, shattering it, to rescue you. This shows it cares about the boy more than its own fears.

Controls

Controls matter. Touch and motion controls, for example, ruin some games but make others possible. Imagine *Guitar Hero* without a big, plastic guitar, or *Jackbox Party Packs* without smartphones. Designers can even take advantage of neglected features: gyroscopes, microphones, cameras. The sky's the limit, as long as it works for your game.

A good control scheme feels like a second skin. It allows players to cross the "magic circle," and let the real world slip away for a while. There are other elements that do this too, like music and visuals. But the hardware you play on is just as important as the play itself, because the hardware *is* the play. It's the interface between you and the game, and you both need to speak the same language.

Crazy Taxi's controls were a match made in heaven. The arcade cabinet was painted in iconic taxi yellow, with brakes and a steering wheel. It seemed impossible to translate to something like the Dreamcast, but it worked. . . surprisingly well. Similarly, *Hotel Dusk* is a gritty detective story that works well on Nintendo DS. It looks like a graphic novel, so

holding it vertically and using the stylus to flip through the story feels natural, even though no other game uses this setup.

It's all about the feel of the controls. Are they comfortable, intuitive? Will your hand cramp after a long gaming session? Do they help immerse you in the world and story? *Cairn* shows you what it's like to climb a mountain as you grab on to handholds and footholds, one limb at a time. Some games go even further than that. *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* breaks your heart simply with a change in its control scheme. (I won't spoil it for you; go play it yourself.)

The Case of the Monkeys

Some control schemes pose unique considerations. Analog sticks allow for fine movement; motion controls, not so much. The *Super Monkey Ball* series is a prime example. It played like a dream in arcades (with an adorable banana joystick) and on GameCube, with its manual stick penned in by an octagonal border. This meant players could lock in a direction and pick up speed as their monkey barreled down a slope or bounced off a wall. Perfect for a platformer known for difficult levels and a robust speedrunning community.

But when the series moved to Wii, it sacrificed accuracy, dealing a nasty blow to an already fading franchise. Movement was clunky and difficult, so players couldn't do the same death-defying stunts they did in previous games. No more balancing on a knife's edge or lining yourself up just right to make the goal. Levels had a completely different feel; they weren't the pulse-pounding, heart-stopping fun of old. So when *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania* released for PC, it felt like the series' dying breath.

Except, *Super Monkey Ball* didn't die. Far from it. *Banana Mania* remastered *Super Monkey Ball* 1 and 2, widely considered the best games in the series. It rendered the originals' dreamlike worlds in captivating detail: Some levels took place on the edge of a colosseum, in a thunderstorm. Others inside a volcano, where rivers of bubbling lava oozed over the rocks. AiAi and friends traveled to space, underwater, even the inside of a washing machine. Even small details charm. The spray of stars as you collect bananas, the rush of confetti as you reach the goal, the way your monkey spirits up into the sky at the end of each level. These all complimented a game with a vastly better control scheme than its older sibling, *Banana Blitz*. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough to restart a dying franchise. *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Rumble* came out not long after.

The PC also offered other advantages. It's easy to share photos from the game on Steam, and since the PC is a more powerful beast than the Wii, they look gorgeous. The controls have their flaws, but the art really shines.

So what can we learn from the monkeys? Controllers can fundamentally alter the feel of the game, but they're also part of a whole package. The best controls add something to the experience; the worst controls ruin what makes a game fun in the first place. Some types of games are uniquely suited to certain platforms. Virtual pet games like *Little Friends: Puppy Island* work great on Nintendo Switch because you can take it with you, like *Nintendogs* and the Nintendo DS. *Bury Me, My Love* has a strong story, but playing it on the Switch is a little worse than playing it on a phone, because it's a game about texting. PCs and consoles are great for games with powerful graphics, but some games are awkward to control with mouse and keyboard. There are always tradeoffs, especially when you're switching platforms.

Art & Animation

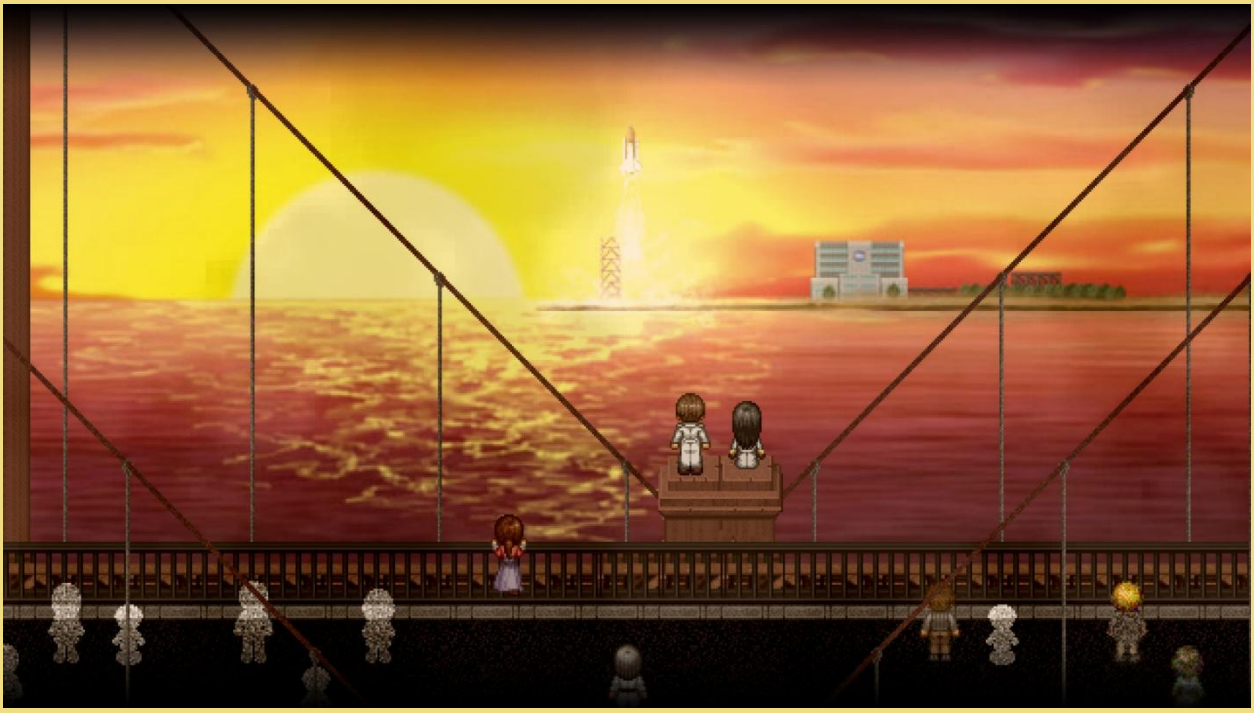
There are many ways to approach video game art styles. You could go for something flashy and ultrarealistic, vibrant pixel art, a monochrome color scheme. But ultimately, the best pick will be one that reveals something about your characters, story, or world, while offering visual flair. A prime example is *The Wolf Among Us*' moody comic book look, full of eye-popping blues, oranges, and purples. It lets us know we're in for a dramatic game focused on a weary character. He's sick of this shit. *The Kids We Were*'s cute voxel art style under richly painted skies captures a sense of childhood wonder, but also a hint of the heartbreak that awaits us.

Strong art styles are so much more than graphical fidelity. They're potent cocktails of color, linework, rendering, shading, and animation. They capture the spirit of a game, convey meaning, and facilitate smooth play. Artists have pushed the boundaries of what games are capable of, and we're all the better for it.

Some of the most visually compelling games take inspiration from outside the world of gaming. *Papers, Please* has a Soviet-inspired look,

with drab grays and muted colors. It sells the feeling of living in a nation not so much inching toward authoritarianism as running full sprint toward it.

Okami follows the sun god Amaterasu as she embarks on a journey to save Japan from an ancient curse. The game is steeped in Japanese folklore and mythology, with a traditional art style to match.
The world is reminiscent of Japanese ink illustrations and woodcuts, with beautiful linework, cel shading, and splashes of watercolor. Amaterasu herself takes on the form of a white wolf, with cloud-like wings and flames spouting from her back. Her movement is fluid, like the brush you paint with to solve puzzles. You never doubt for a moment that the white wolf is really a god.



Mark of the Ninja attaches meaning to light and dark itself. Enemies can't see you in the darkness, but they'll spot you in the light. So you feel powerful in shadow, a sleek killer, while light leaves you feeling naked, exposed. This system subtly teaches you how to play while revealing character.

To The Moon, on the other hand, is full of soft, rich colors, with inky seas of stars and enormous sunsets that make the player feel small in a vast world. Even the shadows feel gentle, like you're never too far from the light. The whole thing feels like stepping inside a memory, which is

exactly what the story's about. Even the pixel art style gives a sense of nostalgia and comfort.

Lumines Arise is a Tetris-style game, set to music. Colored blocks fall from the sky, and you need to match sets of four to clear them. But there's a wrinkle in the system. They'll only clear once a timeline bar passes through that row of blocks, and it's moving in time with the music. Erasing a ton of blocks in one fell swoop earns you massive points, so you're following the rhythm too. You and the bar are keeping time with the music, synced up while a dazzling show unfurls. In one level, bubbles pulse aside ghostly sea horses as the background shifts from light to dark. In another, an orange cat plays with blocks filled with

X’s and O’s, then leaps atop neon signs. Sets of four become neon fish and octopus, as a city is slowly revealed.

Every level is like this: glowing figures run across blocks, patterned marbles slump to the floor, embers dance in the wind. Other effects add to the magic: fog, rain, and golden light, and particle physics everywhere. Everything is a kinetic explosion of lights and colors. All the while, an eclectic mix of tracks bursts like a dam. Here, the music and visuals form a great beating heart. They share a lifeblood; cut one and you kill the other. It’s a laser light show-rock concert on steroids, and you’re composing every moment. When you don’t rack up big combos for a while, the music fades to basic beats. But it comes back as you fall in time. There’s nothing else like it.

Compare that to *Umami*, a much gentler sensory experience. Here, you place blocks in the correct spots to complete puzzles, turning and moving them until they snap into place with a satisfying shake and jingle. It's a delicious experience, with some of the most delectable-looking food ever put to screen. But unlike Lumines Arise, each level feels soft and gentle.

32%
2x2 SQUARES
19 / 70
SCORE
33,698
LOOMII
9
SHOW

66%
2x2 SQUARES
27 / 70
SCORE
6,881
LOOMII
88

BITE
ME

Here, pastel colors dominate. There are no aggressive soundtracks to get lost in, just the joy of solving a beautiful puzzle. In one level, you'll construct a bunny themed cake with colorful flowers and frosted carrots over a pink and yellow picnic blanket. In another, you'll build a scrumptious apple pie with berries and strawberry sauce pouring down the sides. Each puzzle is animal themed, so this one has a purple bat adorned to the side, along with a cat-o-lantern and spooky ghost. The whole thing rests on a purple blanket decorated with cobweb and leaf cookies, among others. There’s an ocean themed cake, a honeyed stack of flapjacks with banana slices, and several other levels to enjoy.

Each puzzle is incredibly visually striking. Combined with soft music and tactile feedback, this is a feast for the senses and a delight. It's a relaxing journey that might appeal to players overwhelmed by *Lumines Arise*'s symphony.

Studying photography and film can give you a huge boost in video game art skills. It can help you learn composition: the way colors, lines, shapes, framing, and other elements can make an image appealing. In the hands of a trained artist, these tools can tell a story without a single word. But it's important to remember that a game's art is taken in concert

with everything else, like music, sound, and graphic design. Do they all mesh in a satisfying way? Do they all tell the same story?

What does animation add to a game? Simply put, movement brings still images to life. Let's look at two examples, *Stray* and *Little Kitty, Big City*. These are strikingly similar, but their animations help them stand out. In the latter's periwinkle and soft gray world, movement is more cartoonish, keeping with the game's wholesome theme. Kitty's poses are more exaggerated here. They don't just crouch low to squeeze under gaps; they flatten their whole body against the ground. They don't just leap onto birds. The action slows as they splay their limbs for the ultimate catch. While cartoony, this style captures something fundamental about the way cats move. It’s realistic without the realism.

Compare that to Stray, where movement is more grounded. Our hero still moves with the nimbleness of a cat, but not in an exaggerated way. There's far less squash and stretch, and time doesn't slow when they leap. They pause for a fraction of a second before jumps, like a real cat might. They don't feel as fluid as water, but they curl up to take a nap in a way I recognize. And when they do, the camera slowly pans out, letting you drink in the scene. Despite the sci-fi setting, *Stray’s* going for a more realistic tone. So it has immersive animations to match.

Sound & Music

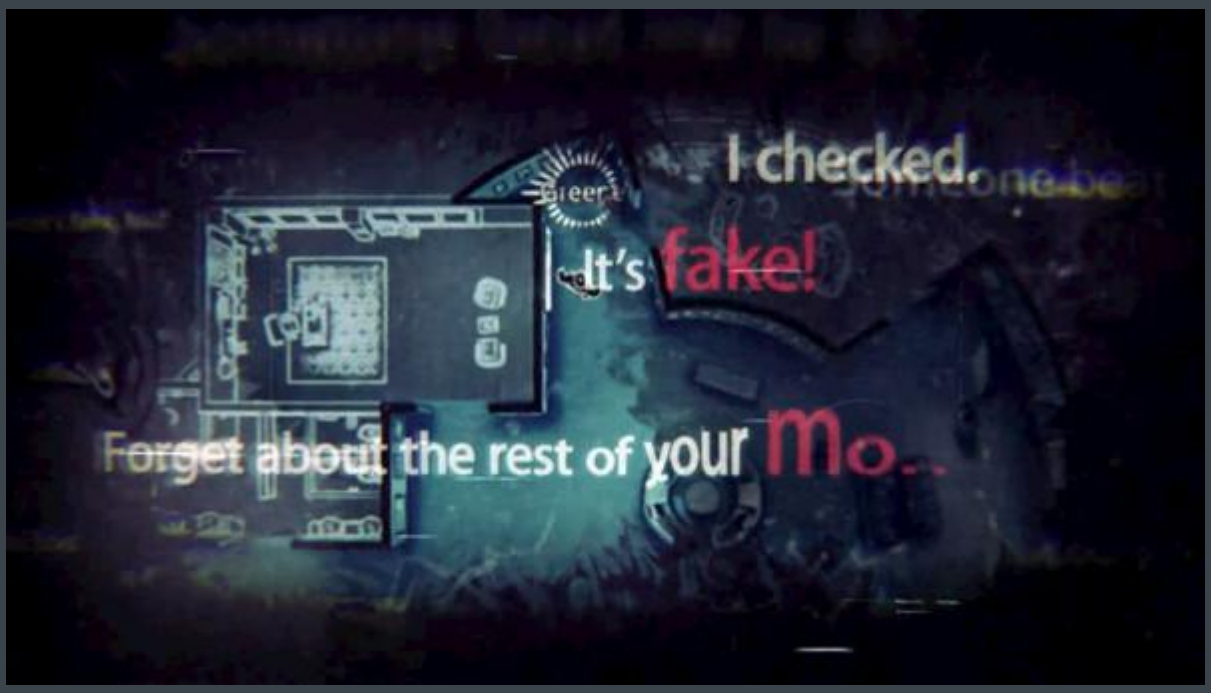
Unheard is a detective game, but it isn't the usual fare. Here, you're introduced to an audio-visual system that lets you play recordings from certain locations while a virtual avatar explores the scene. When you're close to a nearby character, you'll hear their voice. Step away to listen to someone else, and the first voice will fade into the distance. Each scene is represented by a barebones, top-down map, with white rings noting speaking characters.

These are crime scenes, with audio taken shortly before the crime occurred. You'll need to replay the audio multiple times to listen to each character, as important conversations play out in different rooms at the same time. You can even take notes that pop up during certain points in the playback. Once you've correctly named each speaker and answered a short list of questions, the game will tell you if you're right or wrong. A perfect score lets you move on to the next case.

It's a clever premise, and the game's use of sound design is just as creative. Levels ask you to interpret sound effects, find hidden meanings

in ordinary exchanges, and notice timing. Questions like “Who planted the bomb?” or ‘Who sent the blackmail texts?” require you to read between the lines in order to solve them. These short, deductive leaps lead to those satisfying “Eureka!” moments that detective games strive for. They make players feel clever and allow them to live out the fantasy of being a detective.

But sound design can do so much more. One of the best examples of this is *Five Nights at Freddy's*. Now, I know what you're thinking. The game may not feel scary or innovative anymore, especially as the series veers in a more child-friendly direction, but it's easy to forget how much that first game changed the horror landscape. Let's set the scene.



It's 2014, and you're home alone. It's dark and quiet, the perfect scene for some scares, so you boot up that new horror game everyone's talking about. Here, you step into the shoes of some poor bastard who's just taken the worst job opportunity available: a night security guard at Freddy Fazbear's pizzeria. Now, that wouldn't be so bad, if it weren't for the animatronics wandering around at night. As a man on the phone explains to you (via prerecorded voicemails), the animatronics are switched to a “Free Roaming” mode at night, and if they catch you without a costume on, they'll assume you're a metal endoskeleton without a suit. This is against the rules at Freddy Fazbear's, so to keep you in line, they'll stuff you into one of the costumes in the back. These are full of wires and metal plates, which would eviscerate anyone shoved inside.

Every night, the four animatronics: Freddy Fazbear, Chica the chicken, Foxy the pirate, and Bonnie the rabbit will slowly leave their stage and head toward your office. You can monitor their progress through the camera feed to track their movements. If they get too close, you can shut the heavy, metal doors on either side of you.

But everything here costs power; whoever hooked up this place was *not* certified. You’ll start at 100%, but you’ll need to carefully conserve it to

to make it to 6 am, the end of the night. If you lose power, you'll eventually meet Freddy face to face.

This system creates the core tension in FNAF. You want to shut your doors and check the cameras to keep out animatronics, but you can only do so sparingly, lest they jump scare you. Instead, you need to check the cameras and the door lights, close the doors when appropriate, and then check again to see if it's safe. Bonnie and Chica will appear right outside your office, so you can use the lights outside to check for them, but Freddy and Foxy will only appear in the cameras or your office when they're jump scaring you. It's a fast-paced resource management game, and the visuals and audio add to the horror.

The robots should be lifeless husks, but here, they're unnaturally alive. Their fur is dirty and matted, their sunken eyes impossible to read. Chica's jaw hangs slack, like it's broken, and Freddy's pinprick eyes glow in the dark. It's easy to imagine the details the man on the phone conjures: stinking fur oozing snot and blood. Each character is segmented into pieces, reminding us of their inhumanity. They shouldn't be moving on their own, and yet, they are. They fall into the uncanny valley, too human and yet, not human enough.

This makes certain moments feel more eerie, like when characters jerk around and babble in what almost sounds like language. But we can't get a handle on it, can't assess their intentions, and it freaks us out. And

there's more. In the camera feed, it's always dark; static obscures your view, making animatronics difficult to see. The kitchen can't be seen at all, but you'll hear Chica banging pots and pans if she's around. There's a loss of control that makes every moment terrifying.

Even your office, which should feel safe, feels uneasy. When the doors are open, there's a yawning gap on both sides inviting the darkness in. It's dingy and cramped, with fast food wrappers and children's drawings plastered all over the walls. A poster with Freddy, Bonnie, and Chica, ironically says, "Celebrate!" You listen as the fan drones on, drowning out noise you need to hear. The only relief is the loud, metal clang of slamming doors.

Floating in from the hall are a mix of sounds: carnival music, Foxy humming a pirate's tune, a strange, swirling noise, and Freddy's laughter. Some of these give you information. Freddy laughs when he moves from room to room. Chica's banging in the kitchen tells you she's close. The door makes a harsh sound when it shuts, but when nothing happens, and it only makes a feeble noise, an animatronic is already inside the room. It's only a matter of time.

Other sounds immerse you in this haunting world. For instance, Foxy running down the hall when he's left his stage, and his banging on the door if you've closed it in time. A stinger is heard when Bonnie or Chica appear at the door. This is one of the few non-diagetic sounds, ones that don't take place in the world of the game. The animatronics even make dry, breathy sounds when they’re in the room.

Some sounds lead you astray or muddy the waters. There's always a low, ambient drone, for example. In the menu, this is accompanied by a soft, ghostly wail, like a children's choir. (A subtle nod to the story.) There's the fan spinning, the click and whir of cameras tilting, and Foxy singing, none of which tell you anything useful. In fact, they make you strain to hear more useful audio, setting you up for a jump scare. They also *seem* like they're trying to tell you something, but you can't figure it out, which just stresses you out more.

Together, the game is a masterclass in setting mood and tone, imparting information, and throwing obstacles in the player's path through audio. There's a delicate balance of advantageous audio, muddying, and red herring audial clues, which work with the visuals and gameplay to deliver a compelling experience. Sounds even tap into the uncanny valley with ease. There's a reason we were all so frightened back in the day.

12 AM
Show Stage
CAM 1A
CAM 1B
CAM 5
CAM 7
CAM 1C
CAM 6
CAM 3
CAM 2A
CAM 4A
CAM 2B
YOU
CAM 4B
Power left: 93%
Usage:

3 AM
Night 2
Pirate Cove
CAM 1A
CAM 1B
CAM 5
CAM 7
CAM 1C
CAM 6
CAM 3
CAM 2A
CAM 4A
CAM 2B
YOU
CAM 4B
SORRY!
OUT OF ORDER
Power left: 100%
Usage:

But what about music? Music taps into our emotions. But where visuals are obvious, music sneaks in through the back door. It helps tell the story, but this heavy lifting often goes unnoticed. This is by design: the best video game music draws emotion but feels natural, like no other song would have sufficed. It complements theming and play and helps deliver the game's core fantasy.

The choice of instruments, tempo, volume, duration, and pitch create different atmospheres. Consider the sweeping orchestral soundtrack of *Abzu*, meant to evoke the wonder of the ocean. In his video on the music of *Abzu*, Youtuber Scruffy notes that a particular sequence of notes appears throughout the game, rising and falling like a wave. He goes on to say, “The soundtrack even builds in orchestration as you venture deeper. In the shallower oceanic zones, you have lighter synth pads, harps, and a bit of choir voices . . . Some late romantic-style orchestral strings purvey the whole soundtrack, imbuing the gripping sort of emotion of a celebration, even an exaltation of nature. In later, deeper chapters, the music grows and diversifies even more to a full orchestra with harp ensemble, a very lyrical choir, and a manifold collection of synthesizers. It all blends harmonies and intensifies to convey a huge space and almost overwhelming emotion.”

Abzu's soundtrack is adaptive; it changes based on the player's actions. This means different sections can have different feels, and it prevents the music from becoming repetitive or boring. It also means the watery landscapes you explore feel vibrant and alive. Games are an interactive medium, so music should be interactive too.

Mixtape takes this to another level. It plays like a series of music videos, as a carefully curated tracklist accompanies three teens' final night together in their small town. Or as they call it, "The Big Suck." The first track on the list is Devo's "That's Good," which accompanies the group as they skate down the street. The kinetic energy behind it perfectly

meets the moment, as the crew dodges speeding cars and performs tricks on the winding mountain road. The light hits the autumn leaves just right, and the landscape's natural beauty hits you square in the chest. But *Mixtape's* just getting started.

As the night wears on, Rainbow's "Sensitive to Light" erupts like a geyser as the trio escape a house party in an untamed shopping cart. It's a thrashing track that encapsulates the chaos as the teens fly down the street, the cart veering wildly in every direction. With police lights and a helicopter's beam bearing down on them, the teens merge onto a freeway and ultimately fly into the harbor. Later, "Airwalker" by Bertrand Dolby accompanies them as they bound across a field, soaring through the air, untethered by gravity. The music itself sounds carefree and limitless, boundless enthusiasm bubbling up from giddy strings and brass.

These highlights are grounded by ordinary moments. The soulful track "Have you seen her?" follows them through the forest, like a gentle animal. Mondo Rock's "State of the Heart" joins them at Cassandra's house. It's easy listening, with a deep, bassy kick, a symbol of teenage rebellion in a stuffy home. These moments also let you catch your breath

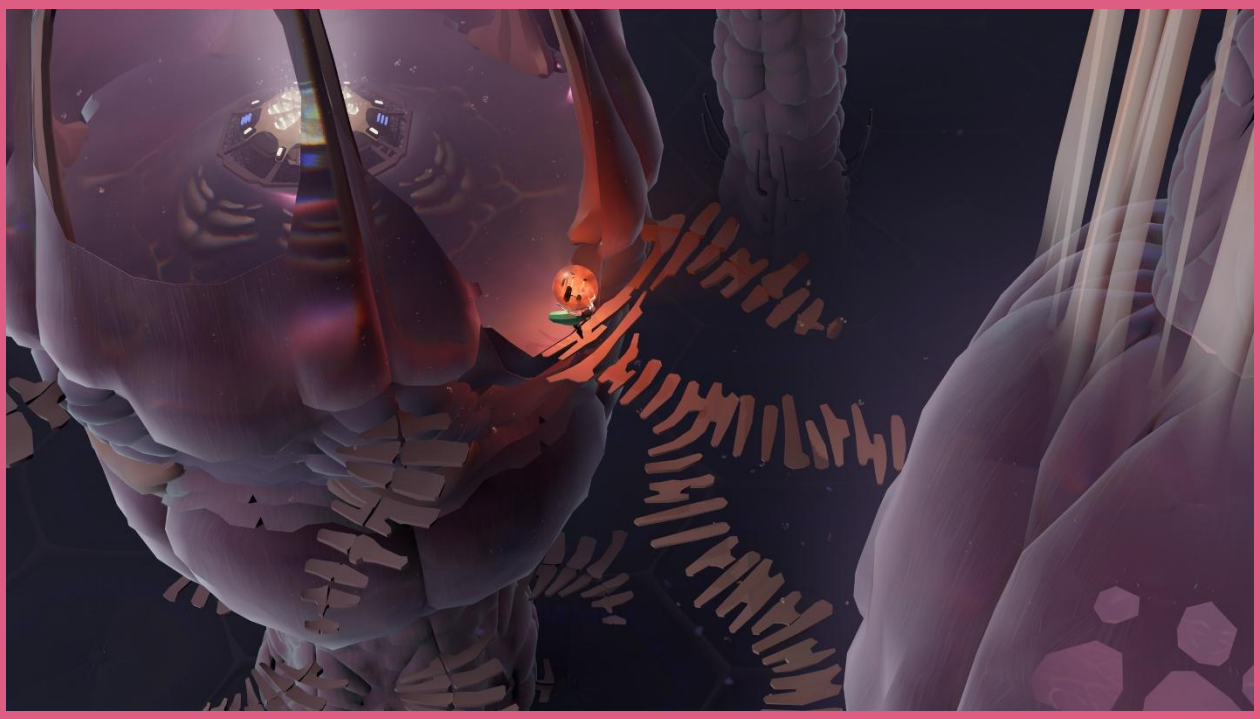
between pops of action and ensure you never feel desensitized to the sights and sounds. They're also true to life; our lives ebb and flow.

Here, the music is a character in its own right. A fourth member of the group that accompanies them everywhere they go. It's the soundtrack to their greatest moments and their deepest shames. It's what lightens dull hours and gives color and texture to their world. It's their escape from everything messy and intractable about not just being a teenager, but being a human on planet earth. That's something we can all relate to.

The Three Pillars

Game writing has three pillars: plot, character, and lore. Plot is easy: it's what happens in a story. Character is what it says on the tin. It's character writing and design. Lore is your world and the facets that make it unique. And good games don't have to deliver on all three equally. Some great games nail one or two of these facets and keep the other(s) at a basic level.

Take *Cocoon*, for instance. It's not the plot or characters that excite here. It's the strange world you're thrust into. Here, you're a bug that can hop between worlds. Each world is encased in a colorful orb, and you can dive in and out to explore different lands. Each one is nestled in another, like a Russian nesting doll. Within these worlds, you can place orbs on buttons to power machinery, like lifts and platforms. Each orb also has a unique ability, like revealing hidden paths or changing states of matter. It's a surreal and intricate puzzle game that has you asking, "What's going on here?" The satisfaction of solving puzzles and desire to know more drive you forward. Environments are also fun to explore; each world has a unique ecosystem and color palette that bring it to life.



In keeping with that sense of mystery, there's little UI to guide the player. Instead, well crafted levels naturally guide players to points of interest with visual and audio cues. You're like that bug, born into a desert landscape with nothing but instinct to go on. As you play, you find patterns in what once were inscrutable alien symbols and uses for inarticulable machines. You become familiar with your abilities and limitations and gain a sense of confidence. The music swells when you're on the right track, and you march on.

There are other ways to impart lore, of course. Character background chatter, readable books and notes, item descriptions, mouse-over text. Even small things can carry meaning: meals served, architectural styles,

the games kids play. Anything that makes a world feel lived in, like it wasn’t made for you alone, is lore.

The World Ends with You excels in all three pillars. In 2007, it was fresh and innovative in nearly every way, from its soundtrack to its combat system. But for me, it's character that resonates the most. The game follows Neku, a disaffected 15-year-old who wakes up in the heart of Tokyo's Shibuya District. He doesn't know where he is or how he got there, but he notices a black pin on his person. This pin lets him hear the thoughts of people all around him, who can't hear his cries for help. Suddenly, a group of strange-looking frogs attack him, and he runs away, only to crash into a girl his age.

She reveals the truth: they're trapped in a twisted game in an alternate version of Shibuya. Here, departed souls compete for a chance to return to life or transcend to a higher form of existence, a Reaper. Reapers devise missions, which players receive via text. If they fail to complete them in time, they're erased forever.

Those frogs Neku encountered are called Noise, and they can only be defeated by a team. This forces him to work with others to survive, against his wishes. Neku is a loner; he doesn't understand people and

actively avoids them. But here, when he's alone, he's defenseless. This is the heart of the story: Neku's journey from an asocial kid to someone who cares about others, who chooses to be part of the world. He grows to care about people like Shiki because he's forced to lean on them for support. Furthermore, his newfound mind-reading helps him realize the rich interiority of others. Everyone's struggling with their own hopes, dreams, and fears, just like him.

Gameplay reflects themes of connection and interdependence. In combat, for instance, you're controlling both Neku and his partner. By switching between them, you'll deliver more powerful blows. This shows us that Neku is forced to work in tandem with his partner. As the player

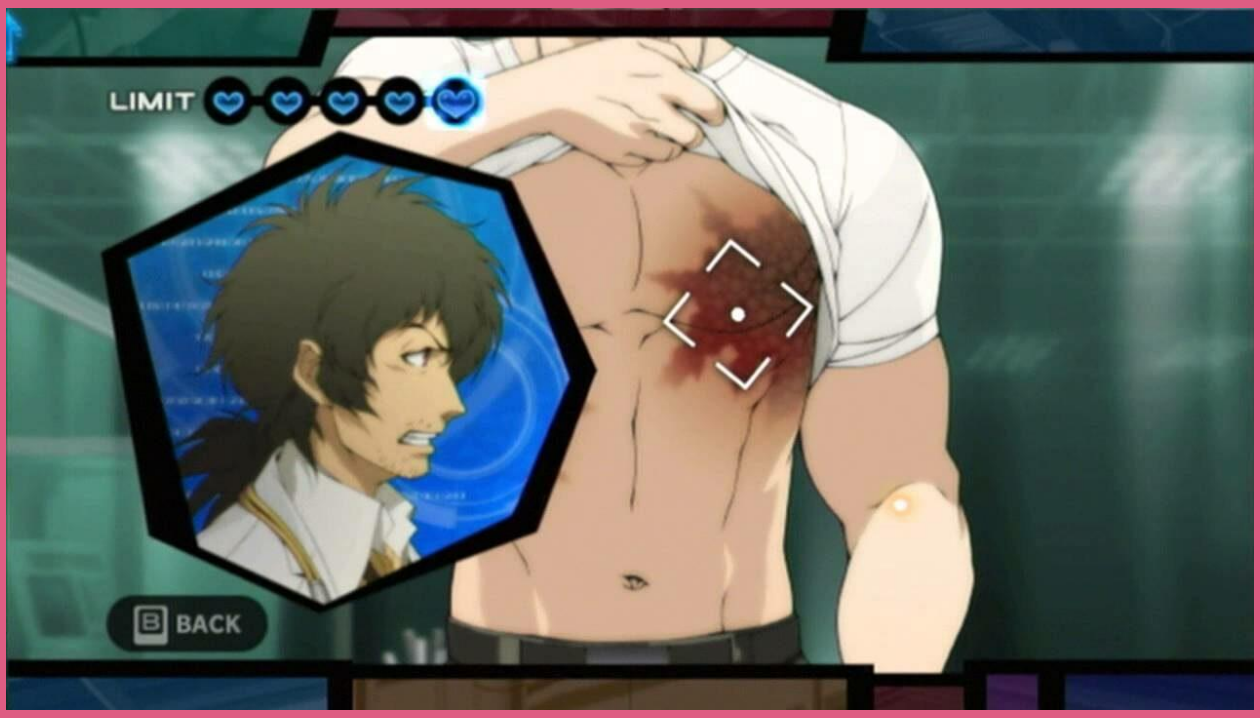
worries for both of them, so too does Neku. They even share the same health bar. If one fails, they both do. In Mingle Mode, you'll earn perks just from being near other Wi-Fi DS owners, regardless of the game they're playing. It's a cool feature, but it also reflects the game's themes: community makes us stronger. It encourages players to seek out others, to forge bonds like Neku.

In the final scene, Neku meets his friends, Shiki, Beat, and Rhyme, by the Hachiko statue, back in the living world. Fitting, that they meet at a symbol of love and loyalty. He asks if another character, Joshua, will be joining them. He's come a long way from the start.

Neku shows the hallmarks of a well-written character. For one, he's flawed, so we can all relate to him, even if we're flawed in different ways. Two, he changes over the course of his journey. Here, it's a positive change, something beautiful to witness. But it doesn't have to be. It can be just as compelling to watch someone change for the worse, to see how low they'll go. Three, he has a distinct personality that lets us connect with him. He feels like someone we might know in our own lives. Maybe he reminds us of ourselves.

He also embodies a fundamental principle of storytelling: characters are tools to tell a story. Neku isn't an end in himself; rather, he's a vessel for the game's themes. Even his design expresses them. At the start, his shirt covers half his face, and he often has his arms crossed, shutting out the world. In the final scene, his hands are in his pockets. His face isn’t tucked into his shirt anymore; instead, he smiles at his friends.

Plot-focused games tend to have original stories, surprising twists, or something meaningful to say. (They might even have all three.) Games like *Trauma Team*, *The Walking Dead*, and *American Arcadia* have interesting premises, but it’s the execution that leaves us asking, “What happens next?”



Making a Game

In short, what makes a good game? Study. Study everything. Play a wide roster of games, from fighting games to platformers to visual novels. Analyze as you play: level design, balancing, art styles, narrative, sound effects, musical cues. Listen to talks from GDC (they're free on YouTube) and read developer's blogs and game reviews from niche websites.

Actually, I can't stress that enough. Reviews are vital to understanding what works in video games. Those reviewers are doing the same thing: deconstructing every aspect, articulating what makes a game tick (or not). Game reviews are art forms in their own right; writers connect their everyday experiences to the games they play in thoughtful and surprising ways. Different writers approach games differently. So does each site.

Games are similar. There are best practices but no perfect answers that work for every game, only the ones that work for yours. Incorporating your narrative into your mechanics sounds good (and usually is!) until you're writing a visual novel. Adaptive soundtracks are awesome, until

your game needs silence (a la films like *A Quiet Place* or *The Birds*). Context is key.

That's why learning a variety of subjects is essential. In art alone, games draw from the same principles as classical painting, illustration, animation, filmmaking, and photography. It's just as important to understand the psychological effects of shapes and colors as it is to understand the 12 principles of animation. Watch films, take photography classes, find free art textbooks online. Then look at the way designers have applied that knowledge to games.

But “everything” is a little broad, right? Let's break it down. Games are a form of expression, so look at the ways people express themselves. Besides the above examples, music, literature, and myths and legends relate directly to games. What are the elements of a piece of music? Why does your favorite song make you feel that way? How do writers use symbolism? What common threads lie behind our most cherished stories? How do we find different meanings in the same piece of art?

You’re creating for a global audience, so learn about different cultures and religions. Obviously, you’ll never know everything about every culture, but looking outside your own offers valuable new perspectives.

It'll help you see the universal, the things we all share, and appreciate our differences. These insights offer new ideas for stories, gameplay, and design philosophies and processes.

A beginner's grasp of psychology is essential, since games are all about the experience. At a basic level, what makes people feel scared, serene, angry? What's the difference between challenge and frustration? How do our cognitive biases shape our sense of what's fair, and what makes for a believable story?

Brush up on math and physics. How does light interact with different objects? How does sound travel in different environments? Which algorithms and values underlie the best leveling systems? How can math tell a story?

Take inspiration from the games of yore, not just recent releases. There's so much to learn from gaming history, both its greatest heights and darkest hours. Documentaries like Netflix's *High Score* and YouTube series like Crash Course Gaming and Liam Triforce's console retrospectives have helped me understand and appreciate games at a deeper level. The best game design channels, like Extra Credits, Game Maker's Toolkit, and Noclip, often use the history of games as a source of

insight. Every piece of art is in conversation with other artworks; the same is true for games. The lessons of the past are ours for the taking.

But don't just learn from games. The best games also draw from the developers' lived experiences. *Papers, Please* was born from Lucas Pope's travels to other countries. He spent a lot of time watching workers at border checkpoints; this captured his imagination and led to a fantastic game. The developers of *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2020* took flying lessons to better understand the experience. Which experiences in your own life inspire you? Where do you have something interesting to say? It's never too late to try something new: paragliding, kickboxing, jigsaw puzzles. Each hobby makes you a more well-rounded person with more to reflect on.

I've found insight in YouTube channels that discuss certain elements of games, like New Frame Plus for animation, Design Doc for graphic design, and Scruffy for audio and music. Sites like Creative Bloq have helped me understand video game art, and Game Developer and Gamasutra provide excellent analysis. These are all free, so check them out. You could also reach out to your favorite designers by email or social media and see if they'd be willing to talk shop. You're more likely to get a response from indie devs, but you never know! And don't underestimate

the power of a well-written research paper or book. Your local library has a ton of free resources.

The specifics of your game might also shape the subjects you tackle. If you’re crafting a city builder, for instance, check out a book on urban design or listen to some episodes of 99% Invisible. If you’re making a *Mirror’s Edge*-esque 3D platformer, watch some parkour videos. How do the subjects navigate those spaces? How do they move? What makes them satisfying to watch? Through reflection and creativity, you can make a great game, even with a limited budget, timeframe, and skillset. Now go watch Extra Credit's “Practical Advice for Creative Projects.”